DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 085 696 CS 000 910

AUTHOR Allen James L., Jr.
TITLE Literature, Readers and Responses.
PUB DATE Nov 71
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (61st, Las Vegas, November 25-27, 1971)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Book Reviews; *Content Analysis; Critical Reading; English Instruction; Formal Criticism; Higher Education; *Literary Analysis; *Literary Criticism; Literature Appreciation; Student Reaction; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS Slatoff (Walter J); With Respect to Readers

ABSTRACT

In his recent book, "With Respect to Readers: Dimensions of Literary Response," (See ED 048 291) Slatoff stresses the view that a variety of responses to any given work of literature will inevitably occur among various readers and that the subject of study in a course on literature should not be simply the pieces of writing, but the nature, significance, and values of the multidimensional interaction between those pieces of writing and the consciousness of the individual reading them. Slatoff's book is a strenuous negative reaction to methods of studying literature that were spawned in the United States by the "New Criticism" and by formalistic criticism. A piece of literature is not so much an object as it is a source of an experience. It is this complex, many-faceted individual experience which occurs when a reader involves himself with a literary work that Slatoff wishes to explore on mental, emotional, spiritual, ethical, and physiological dimensions, although he acknowledges that techniques of studying and teaching literature have not begun to provide even the most rudimentary guidelines for such a complicated understanding. (RB)

ED 085696

DA 15
OCT 27 1971

James L. Allen, Jr.
University of Hawaii at Hilo
Hilo, Hawaii

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
James L. Allen, Jr.
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER"

Literature, Readers and Responses

The topic of today's discussion group, "Responding to Literature," evolved in part from an interest in Walter J. Slatoff's recent book With Respect to Readers: Dimensions of Literary Response. When the convention's program chairman, Professor Edward Jenkinson, invited me to speak before this group, he requested that I incorporate some of the ideas of Slatoff's book into my presentation, if possible. Since Professor Slatoff himself is not here with us today only because of prior comitments, I feel that I should do more than simply incorporate some of his book's ideas. In fact, I think that it would not be inappropriate for me to base most of my comments upon his ideas and views, although that is not to say that I will always be in agreement with them.

Professor Slatoff, in addition to being a teacher of literature, as most of us are, is also a creative writer and artist in his own right. As such, he has a collection of views and set of concerns about the study of literature which are almost inevitably somewhat different from those held by scholar-teachers or teachers with a critical bent. This basis for a difference in views can perhaps be safely and accurately identified as the matrix from which the thesis of his book derives, although he does not explicitly suggest such a possibility himself with any significant degree of emphasis.

To sum up the main thrust of Slatoff's book as concisely as possible, one might describe it as a rather strenuous negative reaction to methods of studying literature that were spawned in the United States in the not-too-distant past by the so-called "New Criticism" and by formalistic criticism. The New Critics' emphasis upon detachment and "distance" between literary

CS 000 910

FILMED FROM BEST AVAILABLE COPY

works and readers is repeatedly decried by Slatoff. The cool--or even cold--analysis and study of strictly formal elements and features of a poem, a novel, or a story are insistently denigrated as grossly inadequate means of understanding a work of literature and its value or meaning for readers. We are constantly reminded that a piece of literature is not so much an object as it is the source of an experience. It is this complex, many-faceted individual experience which occurs when a reader involves himself with a literary work that Slatoff wishes to explore in its multitudinous dimensions--mental, emotional, spiritual, ethical, even physiological--although he acknowledges at the outset that, to date, our techniques of studying and teaching literature have not begun to provide even the most rudimentary guidelines for such a complicated undertaking. Admitting that he is raising a series of questions more than he is offering definitive answers, Slatoff states in his preface that his intention is "to generate discussion." Since we are congregated here today for the purpose of involving ourselves in discussion, perhaps we can let Slatoff's book and the views enunciated in it help us to generate.

In the first several chapters of his book, Slatoff stresses the fact that a variety of responses to any given work of literature will inevitably occur among various readers. That differences in individual background, in personality make-up, and even in basic sense perceptions will result in almost unimaginably wide divergences of response from reader to reader is reiterated time and again. Furthermore, Slatoff contends that in our present methods of studying and teaching literature these differences in response from reader to reader are ignored or neglected, while an inappropriate kind of uniformity of response is expected or demanded by emphasis upon objectivity, knowledge of form, and the like. Chapters in the latter part of the book consider more specifically such things as readers' responses to the presence of narrators in fiction, the importance of

readers' reactions to disorder and unpleasantness in literature as opposed to the generally expected order and pleasure, and the need for encouraging and inculcating students' immersion and involvement in literary works rather than urging detachment. In short, Slatoff's central argument is that the subject of study in a course on literature should be not simply the pieces of writing themselves as independent entities, but rather the nature, significance and value of the multi-dimensional interaction between those pieces of writing and the ~~human~~ consciousnesses of the individual human beings in the class who are reading them.

I have no serious arguments, really, with Slatoff's contentions about what ought to be. However, ~~although~~ the complexities of certain aspects of the labyrinth which he urges we should explore are so mind-staggering that it is difficult not to have reservations about the possibility of ever accomplishing much of significant value in some of them. In other words, the problem of seeking success in the approach he calls for is not simply analogous to the almost futile hope of ever fully understanding the intricacies of human consciousness in relation to the human brain; it is, in fact, directly related to that. For the response of a reader to a work of literature is obviously a function of his consciousness or mentality and everything that underlies or contributes to its existence. But despite the complexities inherent in the method advocated, it is not what Slatoff advocates that I take exception to so much as it is his assumption--dogmatically and repeatedly stated or implied from the beginning to the end of his book--that virtually none of what he espouses is currently practiced by teachers of literature. To put the matter another way, Slatoff's charges and attacks about the inadequacies of present methods of analyzing and studying works of literature may apply--though with less force and accuracy today than was the case a decade or two ago--to certain modes of scholarly and critical evaluation in professional journals or

academic publications of other kinds, but I do not believe that they apply with the completeness that he suggests to what goes on in classrooms, either at colleges and universities or in public school systems. The main exception to my point here might be the graduate seminar, where, for one thing, the student has already been exposed at lower levels to some of the approaches which Slatoff contends are being ignored and, for another thing, the student himself is making the transition from pupil to scholar or critic. But I do not believe that most of us as teachers at the undergraduate or secondary level emphasize purely formal elements or neglect the interaction between a work and its reader to the extent asserted by Slatoff, who gives little or no attention in his book to the significant distinction between studying literature in a classroom with students and studying it in the "laboratory," privately or with fellow experts and specialists.

To illustrate the point that I am making here, I will cite only a couple of the more obvious and dubious of Slatoff's supposed by-products of teachers' supposed over-emphasis upon objectivity and formal elements. As teachers of literature you may ask yourselves--as I asked myself while reading Slatoff's book--whether or not his charges are fair and accurate, whether or not they apply to the literature classes that you teach or to those that your colleagues and acquaintances teach.

At one point, Slatoff argues that today's teachers "insist that in any responsible discussion a character should be viewed as a verbal construction rather than as a psychological entity or living being." Please understand: this is not what Slatoff says we <u>should</u> do. It is what he says that in our over-emphasis upon objectivity and form we mistakenly <u>do</u> do. Is he correct? Do we, in fact? I, for one, do not. Maybe I learned my literature and how to teach it from the wrong people (although I do not think so), but I have always stressed to students the immense importance of recognizing Chaucer's Wife of Bath, for example, as a "psychological

entity or living being" rather than as a "verbal construction." I have always emphasized the necessity, for literary understanding, of accepting Falstaff and Prince Hal as persons, whose personalities interact with each other like those of real people, rather than as mere component structural elements to be dispassionately studied and examined as part of some literary "object." Or, to go to one of Slatoff's own favorite sources of examples, I try to help students realize the importance of seeing Mink Snopes as a living, breathing human being with a very special character and will of his own, if they are to understand fully what Faulkner is trying to suggest about life and human experience in The Mansion. In fact, students should be brought further than that, to see that the Mink Snopes of The Mansion is a recognizably different human being from the Mink Snopes of The Hamlet, if they are to understand the fact of and nature of the evolutionary development in Faulkner's own views on life and human nature and what he finds there most worthy of depiction and implied commentary. What about you? Do you present the Wife of Bath, Falstaff and Hal, Mink Snopes, and other important literary characters to your students as human beings, as I do, or as verbal constructions, as Slatoff contends that contemporary teachers do?

At other points, Slatoff makes a big issue of the proposition that blended intellectual and emotional responses and involvement are necessary for the proper reading of a work of literature. Furthermore, he contends that many teachers make a "sharp distinction" between the two and stress the cerebral and analytical, neglecting or even denigrating the emotional in an effort to maintain "distance." He states:

> . . . the notion that almost any amount of knowledge may be relevant to a literary work [seems to be accepted]: knowledge about the social, political, and intellectual history of the period in which the work was written, knowledge about the sources of the work and the tradition of which it forms a part, knowledge about the development of the work itself, its germination, its revisions, its textual variants, knowledge about the life and experience of its author. Our curriculum structures, seminars,

> professional journals, teaching assignments, status hierarchies, and so forth all imply some such belief. Or to put it a little differently, we believe that any knowledge which will illuminate, enrich, or add to the dimensions of the work is relevant knowledge.
>
> When it comes to the relevance of feelings, experiences, memories, attitudes, values, and beliefs, however, and the extent to which these are to be brought to bear, there is . . . a curious silence. . . .

Is there silence in your classrooms upon the relevance of feelings and experiences and the extent to which attitudes, values, and beliefs are to be brought to bear upon reading and responding to a piece of literature? I can hardly believe that there is. There is not in mine. How can I explain to students the important distinction between connotations and denotations in the diction of a poet or a poem without stressing the relevance of just such things? How can I discuss an image and how it functions (or is meant to function) for the writer--especially the poet--without carefully considering the relevance of feelings, attitudes, values, and beliefs? The entire consideration of literature as an art form, in fact, inevitably necessitates strenuous emphasis upon the thesis that the creative writer is using special kinds of language in special kinds of ways for the very purpose of evoking emotional responses and creating a felt experience as well as communicating rational ideas, so that our total consciousness--not just our intellect--becomes involved in any full or meaningful response to literature. This is a primary feature of the study of literature in any course of mine. Is it not in yours?

Limitations of time make it impractical to treat further areas of response which Slatoff seems to assume the average or typical teacher is currently neglecting as a result of the formalistic approach to literature which he takes to be so thoroughly ascendant and dominant in modern academic and pedagogical circles. I think, however, that the two examples which I have touched upon raise some question about the validity of his assumptions as to that ascendancy and dominance. And I further think, incidentally, that the presentation of Professor Mandel, the speaker who is to follow me

on this program, will tend at certain points to sustain my position more than Slatoff's on this issue.

To swing the pendulum back in the other direction, however, and to be as fair as possible to Professor Slatoff, I should not close without acknowledging that the overstatement of his case does not mean that he has no significant argument at all. One can hardly quibble with his observation that "the very nature of schools and classes"--at least as we have come to know them at most institutions--tends to work against the kind of approach to and study of literature which he urges. I take it that that is at least one reason for the widespread appearance in recent years of experimental and innovative teaching techniques, in literature courses as well as elsewhere. Moreover, while I do not feel that the average teacher is as far astray as Slatoff suggests, almost certainly there can be little disagreement with his insistence that in the study of literature "the locus of the event under examination is neither the reader nor the text alone, but the intersection or communion of the two." My feeling is that the good teacher of literature--partly from his training and partly through instinct--already gives more attention to this "intersection or communion" between the reader and the work than Slatoff supposes or suggests. At the same time, however, I am willing to acknowledge that there ~~may~~ might very well be a good deal to be gained in our understanding of literature if an even greater, more conscious, and less instinctive emphasis were given to this "intersection or communion" than is perhaps often the case. Certainly one must concede that, up to the very recent past, the main focus has been upon the piece of literature itself. In their emphasis upon the interaction between a reader and the work, ~~he is reading,~~ contemporary theorists and critics like Slatoff, Norman Holland, Simon Lesser, and Walter Ong may indeed have opened the door to a whole new world of literary study and appreciation. Perhaps Professor Slatoff would be more successful in

persuading all of us to contemplate the possibility of stepping through that door if he weren't quite so urgent in his contention that until now virtually only he has even so much as glanced out the window.

James L. Allen, Jr.
University of Hawaii at Hilo
Hilo, Hawaii